

They Came From Tiree

by
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CHAPTER ONE THE ISLAND AND ITS PEOPLE

Geology and Climate

The island of Tiree in the Inner Hebrides was formed from Lewisian gneiss, the oldest rock in Britain, which forced its way upwards through the earth's crust about 3,000 million years ago. Tiree and its neighbors, Coll and Skerryvore, are highpoints along a ridge of this same rock formation. This rock, upon which Tiree and the others stand, is immensely hard, much harder for example than the softer granite of their neighbor Mull. The island is situated nineteen miles northwest of Iona and twenty-two miles west of the nearest point of Ardnamurchan on the mainland. The ancient Gaels named the island *Eileann Thiriodh*, or land of corn. A play on its name twists it to *Tir barr fo Thuinn*, or 'land beneath the waves', which it must appear to anyone approaching it in a small boat, since three quarters of it lie below sixty feet. It is shaped somewhat like a war club, being a little more than ten miles in length and about five miles in width at its widest point. It covers an area of 13,000 acres. The winds that buffet Tiree ensure that it is devoid of even a single tree, and with the exception of three small hills, none higher than 462 feet, it is entirely flat. Its coastline, forty six miles in length, is indented by a number of magnificent bays, many lined with beautiful silvery shell sand. *An Trágh Mhòr*, the big strand, is over two miles long, but unfortunately Tiree lacks a truly good anchorage.

The latitude of Tiree is the same as the southern part of Alaska, but the island is warmed by the Gulf Stream and does not have the severe cold of the latter. The maximum temperature on average in the summer is just under 20° C. (68° F.), with the highest recorded being 26.3° C. (79° F.) in July of 1991. The lowest temperature recorded in winter was -7° C. (19° F.) in December of 1985. Tiree is known to have bright early summers and a record amount of sunshine for the British Isles, which is said to be about 1400 hours a year. It averages 47 inches of rainfall a year, which is about a third of the rainfall of its neighbor, Mull. The winds that are such a part of Tiree are generally from the southwest and reach gale speed about 34 days a year. The highest wind speed ever recorded on Tiree was 118 miles per hour in January of 1968.

The icy gales of winter often isolated Tiree from the rest of the world for months at a time in the old days, and travel to it was even hampered in the summer by its lack of a good harbor. In 1792 there was a regular ferry sailing between Tiree and Coll, but no such service between Tiree and Mull, although this would have been much more needed. Tiree's main advantage has always been its fertility, which it owes to the wind that blows across it at an average speed of seventeen miles per hour. This almost constant wind brings a myriad of sand particles to the island that regularly replenishes its soil. This wind blows sand inland to form the basis of the fertile *machair*, a flower-rich grassland, that flourishes on the island. This *machair* can be thought of as forming an outer ring around a middle section of dark, rich cultivatable earth. The center of the island, however, is wet, peaty ground termed *sliabh*. Townships were often divided so as to have a section of each sort of ground. The *sliabh* and small hills, which held their moisture, were used for summer grazing, while the *machair* provided grazing in wetter months.

The People of the Past

The men of Tiree had known war from prehistoric times forward, and there had been few generations that had not been bloodied prior to the 18th century. The men of the island had had to defend Tiree from Roman slave raiders, Viking pillagers, and rival clansmen. Over the centuries they had pulled at the oars of the war-galleys of the Macleans and filled the ranks of the clan regiments. They had no doubt followed Sir Lachlan Mòr, the most warlike chief of Clan Maclean, in his bloody battles against the MacDonalds and other of his many enemies. Later they were recruited by their Maclean leaders to fight the battles of the Stuarts, and no doubt left their dead in that unrewarding cause. One of the best descriptions of the people of Clan Maclean was given by William Sacheverell, Governor of the Isle of Man, after a visit to Mull in 1688. It would no doubt been a true description of the men and women of Tiree as well:

“During my stay, I generally observed the men to be large-bodied, stought, subtle, active, patient of cold and hunger. There appeared in all their actions a certain generous air of freedom, and contempt of those trifles, luxury and ambition, which we so servilely creep after. They bound their appetites by their necessities, and their happiness consists, not in having much, but in coveting little. The women seem to have the same sentiments with the men; though their habits were mean and they had not our sort of breeding, yet, in many of them there was a natural beauty and graceful modesty, which never fails of attracting. The usual outward habit of both sexes is the plaid; the women’s much finer, the colors more lively, and the squares larger than the men’s, and put me in mind of the ancient Picts. This serves them for a veil, and covers both head and body. The men wears theirs after another manner, especially when designed for ornament; it is loose and flowing, like the mantles our painters give their heroes. Their thighs are bare, with brawny muscles. Nature has drawn all her strokes bold and masterly; what is covered is only adapted by necessity – a thin brogue on the foot, a short buskin of various colors on the leg, tied above the calf with a striped pair of garters. What should be concealed is hid by a large shot-pouch, on each side of which hangs a pistol and a dagger, as if they found it necessary to keep those parts well guarded. A round target on their backs, a blue bonnet on their heads, in one hand a broad sword and a musket in the other. Perhaps no nation goes better armed; and I assure you they will handle them with bravery and dexterity, especially the sword and target, as our western regiments found to their cost at Killicrankie”

The above description of the men’s dress is of the belted plaid, which came into use around the end of the 16th century. Prior to that time the Highland costume consisted of the leine, the brat, and the trews. The leine was a smock-like shirt, while the brat was a circular mantle worn above it. The trews were colored leggings, which were often worn long and over the feet, more like present day tights. Trews could also been worn short, and could be described as ancient cycling shorts. Trews today, which are most often worn by soldiers of the Scottish regiments, are nothing more than tartan trousers.

The belted plaid was described by a visiting chaplain in 1689 as follows:

“These pladds are about seven or eight yards long, differing in finess according to the abilities or fancy of the wearers. They cover the whole body with ‘em from the neck to the knees, excepting the right arm, which they mostly keep at liberty. Many of ‘em have nothing under these garments besides waistcoats and shirts, which descend no longer than the knees, and so they gird them about the middle.....”

This long length of cloth, something like 20 by 5 feet, was kept in place by a belt, and bore no resemblance to the present day ‘little kilt’. It kept the wearer both dry and warm in the treacherous weather of the Highlands, and was used for many purposes, even as a bed. In battle it was thrown aside, when the Highlanders charged the enemy.

These people, who were so terrible in war and had so little mercy to their foes, were the same as those who delighted in singing of long dead heroes and their miraculous deeds. They also relished the sly poems that pricked the pretentiousness of an overbearing neighbor, and poetry that made a clever play on words. They were extremely musical, singing together at their daily chores, such as pulling at the oars, or harvesting the wheat. The harp and the voices of their bards had been their earliest music. The great pipe came to prominence during the 16th century, when it was used as an incitement to battle. By the 17th century no self-respecting chief would deny himself a piper in his

tail. The harp and the viol lingered on until the end of the 17th century, when they were gradually replaced by the fiddle.

The bards, who kept alive the history and tradition of the clan, were among the more important members of the chief's retinue. Up until the 16th century the bards were trained as professional poets in elaborate, highly stylized meters dating back to the tribal days in Ireland. By the 17th century, however, this traditional style was on the wane, and simpler, more singable forms began to evolve. These became in time products, not of the trained professionals, but of the common people. Tíree had an upsurge of this poetry, which lasted well into the modern era.¹ One of its townships, Balephuill, even became known as the township of the bards, and it was said that all of its inhabitants were adept with verses.

The people of Tíree, and indeed all Highlanders, had a well-deserved reputation for hospitality. They were known for their courtesy to any visitor, as well as to one another. They took an inordinate pride in their race, knew their own pedigree and that of their neighbors, and felt the equal of any man. Even visitors who were critical of them and their way of life marked a stateliness of manner midst their poverty and praised their unaffected bearing. While they honored their chief, whom they loyally supported, there was none of the servility that characterized the English peasant or his counterpart in Europe. Dr. Samuel Johnson, who made his celebrated tour of the Hebrides in 1773, was astounded to see one of the tenants of Hector Maclean of Coll step up and offer his hand to his chieftain. Since this would not have happened in England, Johnson simply did not realize that this Maclean clansman felt that he was as much a descendant of Gillean of the Battle Axe as Hector himself, and as such did not have to bow and scrape to any man. This did not mean, however, that there was a democratic society on Coll or anywhere else in the Hebrides. While it was not uncommon for a descendant of a tacksman to sink to the level of a sub-tenant, there was little or no upward movement. It was only the close kin of the chief or his chieftains who officered the clan regiments, and they were the only ones of the clan who could hope to obtain land in their own name.

Throughout the centuries cadets of Maclean of Duart gained land in Mull, Morven, Ardgour, and Coll, but this pattern does not appear to have been repeated on Tíree, Jura, and Islay. Maclean of Duart apparently kept control of most of the property in the latter three islands. In the early 17th century some offshoots of the Macleans of Ardgour did come to live in Tíree. They evidently did acquire some land, but it was held through Maclean of Duart and not of the crown. This was lost to the Campbells in 1692, when all of Tíree, save the farm of Scarinish, was taken over by these enemies of Maclean of Duart.

Property on Tíree under the Macleans was divided, as it was throughout the Highlands, into a number of 'tacks', or leases, which were probably granted to kinsmen or close followers of Maclean of Duart. These were granted on a short-term basis up to 1600, but longer leases became more common after that date, some even lasting over several generations. These kinsmen of Maclean of Duart, who held land directly from him, were the gentry of the clan, or in Gaelic its *daoine uaisle*. Traditionally they were the military caste of the clan, whose main function was to organize their tenants into a fighting force when the need arose. They also oversaw the periodic re-division of land between their sub-tenants and collected the rents of their tack. They generally sub-let the land in their own hands, and cultivated it through the labor dues of their sub-tenants and cottars. It can be said as group that they scorned manual labor, but were much involved in the cattle trade. This had probably evolved in the past from their taking a leading part in cattle raids against their neighbors. Many did perform a useful service for their tenants, however, by importing seed corn in years of a poor harvest and selling it to those in need at cost price. Some also would buy the cattle of the smaller tenants, so that these beasts could be included in the drove to the southern markets. There were those who unfortunately took advantage of their position to cheat their unworldly tenants, and some got a bad name. Duncan Forbes in his report to the Duke of Argyll in 1737 on his visit to Mull and Tíree criticized them harshly, essentially saying that they served no useful purpose. Nevertheless, they were

¹ This writer's fourth great-grandfather, Neil Lamont, aka Niall MacLaomuinn, was bard to the Maclean chieftain, Hector XI of Coll. Neil's great-grandson, John Maclean, a more celebrated bard, became bard to a later Maclean of Coll and was known as *Bard Thighearna Cholla*. He emigrated to Nova Scotia in 1819 and is well known for his poetry describing the life of an exile.

the natural leaders of the Highland people, who followed their dictates in both war and peace. Their eventual elimination left a hole in Highland society, which did not auger well for future years.

Most of the Maclean tacksmen lost their positions with the coming of the Campbells, but exceptions to this were the Macleans of Kilmoluaig, the Macleans of Hynish, and possibly one or two others. In 1779 at the time of the census of Tiree twelve or thirteen farms were still in the hands of tacksmen, of these four were in the hands of Macleans, while the remainder were held by Campbells. Apparently these Macleans had either been confirmed in their tacks after the Campbells assumed control of Tiree, or regained them sometime later.

The ranks below the tacksmen were filled with their sub-tenants, who paid for their land in kind and service. These men and their families can be considered the middle class of Highland society. They had no written lease and only held their property at the goodwill and sufferance of the tacksmen. Society was organized throughout the Highlands in this manner, and this insecurity of tenure helps to explain the ease in which the tacksmen were able to recruit a fighting force from the sons and servants of their sub-tenants. In ancient times, however, the sub-tenants were able to look to their tacksman for aid and assistance in time of need. The ties that bound a clansman to his chief and tacksman were extremely strong, and were equally binding in the reverse direction. The chief or chieftain and his tacksmen had a definite responsibility to their people and their welfare, which went well beyond any commercial interests, and was deeply rooted in the Celtic tradition. Time was to weaken these ties upon Tiree, but there is strong evidence that the islanders clung to their ancient bond with the Macleans for as long as two centuries or more after the chief of the clan had lost the island to the Campbells. The sub-tenants of Tiree formed small communities upon the island, commonly called townships. These were farmsteads, which were held in common by a number of men and their families. In the beginning each might have held an equal share, but by the 18th century one might have one-sixth while another no more than a tenth. As time went by the obligation of the sub-tenant to divide his small share among his sons and other close relatives resulted in even more fragmentation. The best of the arable land was farmed in run-rig, or in strips, which the sub-tenants drew lots for periodically. A tenant's holding were not the enclosed plots in which farming is done today, but separated strips, which were rarely adjacent to one another. A rig might be twenty or thirty feet long, with their length as much as ten times more than their width. It was higher in the middle than at the edge, because the soil was constantly turned toward the center. A stony or marshy area often lay between the rigs, which served to drain away surplus water. In this way no one tenant of the township had the best land, because it was divided between all, each having a part of the best and worst of the arable land.

A much older method of farming that preceded run-rig is only now being identified, and almost nothing is known of it. This may not be the case in the future, as more sophisticated tools are used to unearth the past, but for the present it must remain undefined.

The highest yielding land, normally in the vicinity of the houses of the tenants, was the 'infield' of the township. It was under cultivation continually and constantly received the manure of the tenants' cattle. Discarded thatch and other organic debris were also used as fertilizer, as well as was kelp where available. The less fertile areas of the townships were considered its 'outfield', and rigs in it were often allowed to lie fallow. The outfield rigs also received less manure, and had to rely on the dung of the livestock penned in the outfield in the fallow periods.

Run-rig farming, by its nature, was inefficient, particularly as the population increased and the land was divided into smaller and smaller lots. It did offer a means, however, by which land could be provided for younger sons and other kinsmen, and it was prized for the security it seemed to offer. It was not uncommon to find the majority of a farmstead carrying the same surname, and all were part of a close knit group.

The cattle and other livestock of the farm, which might be comprised of horses and a few sheep, were grazed on a common pasture of the township.

Attached to townships, along with the sub-tenants were the cottars. They were one step down in the social scale, and were of the same class as servants. The distinction between the small crofter and the cottar was often blurred, however. Even those considered landless often had a small patch of ground, upon which they grew potatoes. Most sub-let this land from the tenants, rather than from the landowner. Other cottars were allotted land upon which the tenant furnished seed corn or other seed grain, and upon which they provided the labor. The crop was then divided between them. It was

common that the cottar was a kinsman of the tenant upon whose land he lived. Sons and sons-in-law were often provided for in this manner, despite some proprietors' attempts to control such subdivision. In areas where kelping was most profitable the landlords did not discourage such fragmentation of their property, since kelping was so labor intensive. The small tenant, often needing to produce as much processed kelp as possible to make ends meet, was often happy to sublet some of his croft for this purpose. In early days the cottar was often a herdsman, who, by tradition and customary right, could also graze his cow in the township pasture. Thus the term cottar covered many different types, and they were frequently the aged, the widowed, and the poor.

The above description of the social classes in the Highlands does not include the professional soldiers and seamen, who were part of 'the household men' of the chief of the clan. They were part of the scene prior to the 17th century, but had essentially disappeared in later years. Their part in the warfare of the Hebrides is discussed in a later section.

The inhabitants of Tìree were sheltered in their farmsteads in houses grouped together at the edge of the joint fields. Almost all were built "*an iar's an ear an dachaidh as fhèrrm cùl ri gaoith agus aghaidh ri grèinn*" (to east and west the house that's best, back to the wind, face to the sun). These dwellings had double drystone walls with a core of sand which were about six feet thick. They commonly had deep set windows and one doorway. This construction was found necessary to withstand the heavy gales that buffeted the island. The most valuable part of the house was its timber, since this commodity was in scarce supply on treeless Tìree. The people of the island had to rely either on driftwood salvaged from the beach, or make time consuming trips to Mull to cut wood. Wood was used to form the 'couples', which supported the roof. These were two pieces of timber tied together at the top to form an inverted V, with the ends resting on the inner wall. The roof-tree was laid along the top of a series of these couples, and lighter timbers were placed horizontally along the sides. A closer layer of rods were fastened to each other by wooden pegs or tied together with rope. The roof frame was covered with two square foot turves cut from the moor. It would take about a thousand of these to cover the average roof, and might take a man five days to cut such a number. If this was carefully maintained it could last several lifetimes. The usual hatching material on the island was a grass, called *muran*, which grew on the dunes along the shore. It was placed loose upon the roof and raked into a regular covering, after which it was secured with ropes weighted with stones.

Lime made from limpet shells was often used to whiten the front of these dwelling and the window apertures. It was not uncommon to find grass or flowers growing on the wide wall head of the house. It was often the favorite perch of the dog of the family, even an occasional sheep, or one of the more mobile of the cattle. A lobby was inside the door, and to one side was a kitchen and on the other side either a 'best room' or bedroom. A small bedroom lay straight ahead. The children of the family often slept under the eaves, and gained access to this area by a small ladder.

These homes were surprisingly comfortable, and were both warm and dry even in the winter months. Even the homes of the tacksmen had earthen floors, which were beaten hard, sometimes by herding sheep inside the house or even holding a dance in the building. Over a period of time, however, the few pieces of furniture tended to settle into such a floor. During the visit of Boswell and Dr. Johnson to the Hebrides in 1773 the former was given a bed in the home of MacQuarrie of Ulva, which was made up elegantly with fine sheets of India cotton. While he was preparing for bed, however, he found his feet were "*in a mire*" as the bed stood on bare earth which the rain had turned into a mud puddle.

The smoke from the peat fire in the center of the floor was supposed to find its way through a hole in the roof as there was no chimney. Most often the smoke made its way out through the thatch, however, making one foreign observer to liken these homes to "smoking dunghills". The beams and rafters were soon glossy and black from the soot of the peat fire, and the term 'Black House of the Hebrides' seems an apt term. In most of the Western Isles the cattle were sheltered under the same roof as the family in the winter months, but this was not the case on Tìree, where all livestock was housed separately.²

Folk living on Tìree in past days subsisted on what we would call 'simple fare'. Oatcakes were regularly supplemented with milk and cheese. Shellfish, mainly limpet and welk, had been used

² This older style of house, where there was a central peat fire and no chimney, generally went out of use on Tìree by the 1850s.

as food since ancient times. It is interesting to note, however, that in 1786 an observer reported that he found the islanders “*depend chiefly on the produce of the ground, though the coasts abound on every side with all the varieties of... fish. This discovery was only made, strange to relate... when two farmers realized £60 in a single boat after they had finished the daily labours of the field*”. The reasons, he concluded, were that the islanders were first and foremost crofters, and that too many were too poor to buy a boat and equip it. In addition there were no safe harbours, and the taxed salt needed to preserve the catch was difficult to purchase legally from Oban. A writer in 1845 indicated that nothing had changed in this regard and bemoaned the absence of fishermen on Tiree. He noted the presence of powerful boats from Aberdeen, while only 10 boats were regularly employed by natives of Tiree, which were “*slight cockle-shells*” in comparison.

Beef, of course, was esteemed as a delight, and eaten with some regularity, at least in good times, but it rapidly disappeared from the diet in the first half of the 19th century, when the islanders needed to maximize their income. The potato, which was to become so vitally important in the diet of the islanders, only began to assume importance in Tiree during the middle of the 18th century. It grew to provide 75-80% of the nourishment of the people a hundred years later, because it was the most efficient use of the tillable ground on the overcrowded island.